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Palimpsests of Identity: The Poetic Quest of Theodore Roethke

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North-American poet Theodore Roethke has been endorsed as one of the most suggestive writers within the group of the so-called 'Confessional Poets'. While acknowledging that most poetry is, in fact, a form of confession, Roethke examines himself and his surroundings with such a depth of perception as to plunge into those unlit regions of the self out of reach for the conscious mind. His oeuvre shows a substantial biographical streak, attempting to reconstruct his lifelong search for a stable identity, turning an obstacle such as his mental instability into a source for the poetic ciphering of his quest.

This definition of personal identity is sought through a series of different metaphors: several masks, disguises and roles are used as symbols of the many-fold nature of the fractured self, which acquires a palimpsest quality in which identities unfold and proliferate. The stages of the construction of identity, documented in his lyric creation, run therefore parallel to the psychic process Roethke had to undergo, one which caused him years of suffering, confinement and disablement. Roethke's work provides a first-hand testimony on how writing can be a useful therapeutic tool to understand the pathological processes the self must sometimes submerge itself into.

Keywords: Theodore Roethke, identity, poetry, creativity, schizophrenia

1. ROETHKE AND THE CONFESSIONAL POETS: TRAUMA AND CREATION

The use of poetry as a tool for exploration, as a way to present deep emotional troubles or the poet's own ramblings is by no means new: obviously, in the case of lyric poetry the reader is often presented with autobiographical explorations that invite the identification between author and narrator. If we can asseverate that, in general, the frontier between author and poetic voice is diluted in this kind of poetry, in the specific case of Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) we find a substantially autobiographical creation, which attempts to trace the search for an identity that defined the author's life. Poetic voice and what is narrated are intimately united, and the hazardous mental life of Roethke is, in such way, reflected not only in a psychic, but also in a poetic journey.

As Sundhal has written, Roethke's poetry is "completely autobiographical in the broadest sense – a compulsive and continued reassessment of the nature of identity" (1988: 41). This identity, as we will see, is divided and split, and its difficult and eventful reconstruction is poetized in most of Roethke's *oeuvre*.

The treatment of autobiographical facts that Roethke performs in his poetry invites to the connection between his periods of psychotic crises and the writing of the poems themselves. To Seager, "the very qualities that made Ted a poet seem to have been the ones that made him ill, his sensitivity and energy" (1968: 103). Roethke's case history as a psychiatric patient includes five confinements in wards in two different continents, several leaves for mental illness in those universities where he worked as a teacher, and at least one documented batch of electroshock sessions. The tendency to analyze Roethke's creative process as related to and in dependence with his psychological processes starts with the publication in 1968 of *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*, by Allan Seager, where the author specifically emphasizes the link between the creation of *The Lost Son and Other Poems* and the series of psychotic attacks Roethke suffered between 1945 and 1946, in the months prior to its composition, when he was

interned in Albany General Hospital and Leonard Nursing Home in Londonville, New York.

In his medical record as a psychiatric patient, Roethke received several diagnoses of his illness: considered at first to be a manic-depressive, he was also diagnosed as "manic-depressive neurotic, but not typical" and as a "paranoid schizophrenic" (1). The 'manic-depressive' label was accepted by Roethke himself, who defined his manic phases as a condition where he reached a state of integration with the Universe, of "oneness . . . the sense that all is one and one is all" (1965: 26), what approaches him to mysticism. In any case, Roethke lived in a state of almost permanent paranoia which included delusions of grandeur (such as the unattainable plans he prepared during the three summers when Robert Crouse, the father of a university fellow student, hired him as a resident historian in his Hartland Area Project), and unjustified aggressive behaviors, specifically towards authoritarian figures during both his education and his professional career.

What is surprising and worthy in Roethke's poetic work is his ability to transform an obstacle such as a mental illness (and the ostracism and social stigma it conveys) in a source of inspiration to poetically reflect the search for his own identity. It is in such a setting where, according to Malkoff, Roethke makes use of his madness and his "tenuous sense of self, to become a spokesman for us all" (1982: 137). In certain moments of introspection, Roethke seems to find a positive side to his illness, as a source of poetic inspiration. Thus, he describes in his notebooks the feelings that come after a psychotic attack and their subsequent turning into poetry:

> I suppose it's a dangerous feeling of power that you get after a successful duel with death . . . For some reason this illness seems to have shaken loose powers. I am alive with ideas, some bad no doubt, but there is more vehemence, more energy, more contempt, more love (*Notebooks*, 34, #52. Cited in Blessing 1974: 125)

In spite of the praise of this 'new vision' which often transpires in Roethke's comments on the psychic exploration that permeates his life and poetic work, the poet was also conscious of the price he had to pay for such powers. His second vocation, as a teacher,

was often hindered by his frequent psychotic attacks. To Roethke, teaching offered most interesting parallelisms with what he tried to attain through the writing of poetry: thus, he observed that "to teach too intensively is to get so involved in particular psyches that there can be an actual loss of identity" (Wagoner 1972: 203). Even in those moments when he was not able to teach, Roethke also establishes positive similarities between poetry and teaching: both are the last stand for modern man to protect himself from the imposed social order and the institutions empowered to enforce it. Both poetry and teaching allow creating a new order from which a new and authentic identity can be developed, and not necessarily one that accommodates social expectations.

The continuous search for an identity and for an integrated self which vertebrates Roethke's writing made the poet associate pathology and poetry. Only at the end of his career, with the *North American Sequence* (1964) would he be able to find this sense of integration, able to "transform childhood trauma into a meditative vision of life's wholeness" (Rohrkemper 1988: 28).

Roethke's poetic work, in its most marked thematic and stylistic characteristics, is rooted in a series of specifically North American traditions which nurture it and that are acknowledged in the poems. Malkoff names, among others, the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville), "whose sense of the connections between spirit and matter place the isolated individual amid a great chain of being" (1982: 137). It is indeed true that the exploration of such 'chain of being' and the relationship of man and Nature (a relation which had been abandoned by the post-industrial world) is present in Roethke. However, as much as the natural in Roethke (animals, plants...) is at times a benign guide, at other times it takes a paranoid and hallucinogenic dimension also to be found in Hawthorne or Melville. Poet William Carlos Williams could be also rooted in this tradition of searching for a harmonic inner identity reflected in nature, whose discovery and assertion took Roethke a whole life of poetic exploration.

Following a thematic ascription, we could also link Roethke to a tradition of poets and mystics, visionaries to some, madmen to others. Some features of such 'mystic' poetry which could be found in other American writers such as Allen Ginsberg are well present in Roethke's poems. For Kher, Roethke (as well as Rimbaud, Blake and others)

"cultivates madness for the sake of his art and . . . this creative madness is essential for him to remain in contact with the Daimon or the inner voice of his poetry" (1995: 113). Indeed, to Roethke, the creative process does not only imply the search for an inner poetic voice, but also the search for a stable identity, so that the parallelism between vital and creative process is strengthened.

The poetic task of Theodore Roethke is inscribed, mostly, in the group of the 'Confessional Poets', a label which was used for the first time in the review of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) made by M. L. Rosenthal, where the critic makes reference to the way Lowell openly deals with aspects from his private life, even if not necessarily religious. The term has later been used to include other autobiographic poets mentioned in said essay, and other figures such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and W. D. Snodgrass. The term 'confessional' itself, if vague, is useful since it refers to a long-standing tradition of literary autobiography that finds its origin in the *Confessions* by St. Augustine, once the religious component has been erased. Hoffman also includes in this tradition of confessional poetry writers such as Wordsworth (and his *Prelude*), the *Personal Narrative* by John Edwards, Benjamin Franklin and his *Autobiography*, and the seminal *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman. For our analysis, it is significant to place Roethke within a group of poets who share this 'confessional' status, and which, at the same time, share certain contextual, social and cultural ties, such as, by their time and thematic proximity, Lowell, Berryman, Roethke, Ginsberg, Sexton, Plath and Snodgrass (2). One of the common characteristics to all these poets, according to Hoffman, is their placement in a very specific time: the society of the United States of America after WWII, with "its characteristic anxieties, its multitudinous threats to psychic stability, and . . . its ominous tendency to erode the very concept of viable human identity" (1979: 332). Many of these poets had to live with a long record of mental illnesses requiring hospitalization (3). We find here a generation marked by a common PTSD: postwar society and its anxieties (4), which force them to become "exorcists of contemporary and psychological, sociological, and even political demons" (Hoffman 1979: 330).

2. THE EXPLORATION OF CHAOS AND THE SPLITTING OF THE SELF: THE TRANSIT THROUGH THE PSYCHE.

As we have already stated, the main intention in Roethke's poetry is to reflect his process of self-discovery, the slow and painful forging of his own identity. The very concept of *self* which structures many literary works of the 20th c. thus becomes in Roethke the primary reason of his artistic exploration, placing the discovery and knowledge of his poetic and inner voice before other aspects, something that, in the words of Mills, "endows the poems with a sense of personal urgency and even necessity" (1963: 8). Poems mirror this search, and at the same time they become a medium for Roethke to establish his own identity. The general tendency in lyric poetry to write about the poet's worries also justifies Roethke's intentions: few things are as worrying, and as absorbing, as the expression of the painful psychic processes the self has to embark in.

In Roethke's early poems a firm belief in the romantic notion of the 'opposing self' can be found, whereby the division of the self is regarded as having artistic effects that can be controlled, while in his later work we find a declared feeling of loss of the self, of the self as painfully split, a feeling of absence of unity: as Roethke declares in "Where Knock is Open Wide", "I'm somebody else now" (1975: 70). Roethke regards his self as fragmentary and divided, something which is intimately related with his need to face a psychic journey whereby the disperse elements of such self are ordered again, overcoming inner chaos in his poetry and reaching an inner and external order, with the order of natural elements mirroring the inner unity of the self. Roethke's poetry must, therefore, be read as an attempt to define the frontiers of the self, and then to extend those frontiers to the surrounding world: to Martz, "the subject of meditative poem is the creation of the self" (1954: 32). Roethke longs to go back to that time where the self was first fractured, so as to start reconstructing it: this presupposes plunging into the pre-rational and dark areas of his own memory and experience.

The splitting of the self is dealt with from several perspectives: sometimes, Roethke refers to his identity as if divided into a series of layers that he has to peel to reach the center of the self, which has been covered and masked along the years. The metaphors in this stripping always refer to a repository of childhood emotions and terrors which have to be abandoned so as to integrate positive elements of the self. Thus, in "The Auction" (included in his first poetry book, *Open House*, published in 1941), the reader

is witness to the symbolic auction of pieces of furniture which represent the superimposed layers of Roethke's false self, which have to be retired:

> One coat of pride, perhaps a bit threadbare;
> Illusion's trinkets, splendid for the young;
> Some items, miscellaneous, marked, 'Fear';
> The chair of honor, with a missing rung (1975: 20).

The need to reconstruct the self from zero entails the renouncement to what is usually considered to be a person's greatest treasure: the past, often related to the comforting psychological security provided by childhood memories. The poet, however, leaves the auction with a feeling of liberation:

> My spirits rose each time the hammer fell,
> The heart beat faster as the fat word rolled.
> I left my home with unencumbered will
> And all the rubbish of confusion sold (1975: 20).

In another poem from *Open House*, "Sale", we find once more the parallelism between pieces of furniture and memories: furniture, somehow, correspond to what shapes present personality, to the past itself:

> For sale: by order of the remaining heirs
> Who run up and down the big center stairs
> The what-not, the settee, the Chippendale chairs
> - and an attic of horrors, a closet of fears (1975: 30).

The metaphoric expression of the division of the identity, a recurrent subject in Roethke, will find other voices along his career. In *Open House*, as we have already observed, we discover images of what could be termed 'the furniture of the self' and of the need to remove such furniture to access the nucleus of identity. In this first work we can find, according to Hayden, a strong "dissatisfaction with the Self" (1971: 120). Some stylistic aspects in these first poems (to be later repeated) paradoxically serve to provide a certain vicarious security: in such a way, the rhyme and metrics attempt to

provide the self with an equivalent feeling of security (5). In spite of this therapeutic attempt, Roethke didn't find the consolation he expected: his next collection of poems, *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) is framed in a diametrically opposed direction to this search for security, a new direction that will be followed by Roethke up to the end of his days. Here, he is committed to the risk of hallucinatory psychic journeys, to the hazards of using different masks, disguises and roles, to finding keys for the reconstruction of the self, embarking into what Sundhal calls "a solitary mind coming to perceive its own existence" (1988: 53).

The splitting of the self is therefore not only expressed through layers or strata that have to be removed, as in a palimpsest, to get to the original identity which has been 'written over' in successive layers and which is already unrecognizable. As is usual with schizophrenic disorders, we are witness to the fragmentation of the identity into a constellation of selves, each with its own characteristics, which serve as a means to protect the original self from potentially harmful external gazes. Roethke will remark in "What Can I tell my Bones": "I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions / sometimes I think I am several" (1975: 167). This poetic intuition is endorsed by critical reflections by Roethke himself in *On the Poet and his Craft*, when he outlines what is the notion of self he wants to explore and elaborate on: "I am not speaking of the empirical self, the flesh-bound ego . . . *Myself*, the aggregate of several serves" (1964: 21). Elsewhere in his work, Roethke sees how "The Divided Man Becomes / Mother and Child at one" (Van Dyne 1981: 124). If applied to the poem "The Shape of Fire" (1948), we could analyze the two voices speaking, which seem to belong to two different people at the beginning of the poem, as two different parts of a single mind which are trying to converge and reintegrate. The discovery of split selves from the original subject requires the return, through imagination and memory, to childhood, to the moment when the self was divided. In "The Lost Son", the poet unfolds his poetic voice and becomes more than one character simultaneously, in a proliferation of identities where every figure in the poem is a different aspect of the same self which, through masks and disguises, through different roles, tries to face and clarify what it really *is*.

Roethke also uses the symbolic double or shadow as a metaphor to express the inner division of his self. More specifically, he assumes the division of identity into two

parallel identities, one of which (the old self) must be abandoned, through a symbolic ritual of death of the old identity which enables the creation of a new self, a process Roethke refers to as to "unhinge my shadow" (1975: 62). The process reflects the implicit tension in birth: the need to find a balance between what is rejected and what is adopted as new.

The death of the self, as Roethke poetizes in "In a Dark Time", "in a long, tearless night" (1975: 231) requires a previous route along the depths of the psyche, a regression and inner journey into a subworld full with dangers which is, at the same time, a uterus from which the birth of the new identity will take place. Regression is therefore a necessary condition for rebirth, since by facing those symbolic dangers crouched in the bowels of the psyche and surviving them, the journeying poet is able to forge an identity which culminates in a second birth, in the appearance of a new identity, of a new self. Rebirth is in itself the end, but also the main part of the journey, what Blessing has defined as "the old drama of ontogeny" (1974: 86). One of the rituals of symbolic rebirth found in "The Lost Son" and mostly in "The Shape of Fire" is connected with this idea of a true self hidden behind a series of layers, of false selves, that Roethke has to shed, transforming them into clothes that the narrator slowly takes off. Precisely, one of Roethke's eccentricities, as narrated by Seager was a ritual in which he undertook a

> popping out . . . [of] his clothes, wandering around the cottage naked for a while, then dressing slowly, four or five times a day . . . The ritual of starting clean like a baby, casting one's skin like a snake, and then donning the skin again. It was not exhibitionism. No one saw. It was all a kind of magic (1994 [1968]: 144).

This process of undressing thus becomes a ritual (both in its poetic representation and in its biographical expression) where clothes and false selves are the same thing and must be removed, to enable the birth of a new identity which, most appropriately, Seager described to be "clean as a baby" (1968: 144).

The imagery that Roethke uses in his poetic explorations has a marked dreamlike and hallucinatory character. His poems are inhabited by natural elements (plants and animals) which are presented alternatively as menacing and as guides in the road to the construction of the self. In this complex symbolic universe we find images that

correspond to the destruction of the identity as a fictitious construct, and to its budding reconstruction and rebirth. Mud and mire are presented as images of decadence and rotting of the self, only to be subsequently seen as the primordial slime from which life is created, in a dreamlike metaphor where echoes can be find of the appearance of life on Earth, and which extends Roethke's individual psychic experience to all humanity. The process of coming out of the slime is described by Roethke as "part of a spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more" (1965: 37).

If we study in depth the symbols Roethke uses, we will observe how psychic rebirth is associated with growth and propagation in the natural world. In "Cuttings, later" (1975: 35) the birth and growth of the individual self is mirrored with that of plants and flowers (Rohrkemper 1988: 28): just as plants grow from the soil, the depths and the mud, and rises towards the light in a vertical movement, the protagonist of "The Lost Son" travels into the depths and from there rises into the light of a new identity. Another symbol, also related to the vegetal world, which makes reference to this motif of integration and birth is precisely the greenhouse (6), a place where the natural and the artificial, the organic and the rational meet, and which Roethke defines in "Open Letter" as "my symbol for the whole of life, a womb, a heaven-on-earth" (1975: 39).

The rebirth is not, however, merely symbolic, neither does it have the world of the natural as its only referent: rebirth is also a process of socialization through which the poet tries to adapt to social life, to survival in the adult world. As Galvin writes, the protagonist of "The Lost Son" tries to accommodate

> [t]o the adult forensic world by returning to the autistic world of childhood and beyond into the subconscious mind, enduring a change of identity (which makes him both a new man and the old man), with a resulting change of perspective which permits him to live his life in a better way (Galvin 1971: 95).

This statement by Galvin should be, however, clarified: the poet does submerge in the world of childhood (in a way, an autistic one, since it is not ruled by social norms, which have not been yet introjected), a world that Venon defines as synesthetic, where the frontiers between the objects and all things "open upon each other and exist in a kind of intimate erotic community" (1973: 191). This regression to primary modes of

perception has been considered to be one of the 'symptoms' of schizophrenia, and behind the process of rebirth lays a new perception, a change of perspective. Alas, the many psychotic attacks Roethke suffered did not improve his life or made him live it in a better way: precisely because of this, his poetic oeuvre is a constant exploration, lasting up to his very death, of an ever-elusive identity, which the poet could not reach throughout his life.

The conscience that the poet seems to have at all times of an ongoing process of destruction of the old self and the birth of a new identity is reflected in his belief in the existence of pre-natal memories, which is confirmed by some parts of his work: in "Where Knock is Open Wide", we read how "everything has been twice" (1975: 68). Van Dyne states that the poet "seems to remember and to accept the inevitable pain of post-partum depression" (1981: 124), and the line "the water with the low mouth laps" in "The Shape of the Fire" (Roethke 1975: 61) is analyzed as "a recognition of the change in sustaining fluids occurring at birth, and the warmth of the last line of the first section might recall the unexpected welcome and nurturance sensed in the new atmosphere" (Van Dyne 1981: 124). Up to this moment, we have made reference to the movement of fall into the chaos, but this process is followed by a motif of unification that coincides with the reappearance of the poet from the depths and the metaphoric natural space used there. While the first part reflected separation and lack of harmony, and it showed the need to plunge into an abyss of chaos to find answers, knowing disorder is also necessary to emerge with a new order, from the deepest part of the journey (the pit as symbolized by Roethke) to the mental surface. The reasons for Roethke to undertake such journey are many: personal and psychic conflicts must be noted, but above all there is the concern to find ontological answers to existence itself. The growth of the conscience of the self and his place in society requires the evolution from a state of disgregation to another of integration, through the search of "a sustaining order in the images of his chaos" (Donoghue 1965: 216).

This "history of the psyche" (in Roethke's own words) in the poetic work by Roethke is precisely the "jauntier principle of order" (Roethke 1975: 159) that he tried to find in "Her Becoming": escaping from the false order he already knows, and finding a new order where fundamental notions of growth and decadence are seen as natural changes and, therefore, desirable. This search for balance, forwards and backwards, with traces

from the old identity and the germ of a new one, is reflected in the structure of a number of poems by Roethke. Thus, both poems "Praise to the End" and "The Waking" base their form on a constant shifting restlessness, in a movement of verse and anti-verse which pursues equilibrium between chaos and the artificial imposing of order.

Quite probably, the series of poems where a clearer relation can be found between structure and subject, as linked to the search of order and the forsaking of chaos, is the *North American Sequence* (1964) (7). What Kher has called "[a] road to psychic wholeness" (1995: 11) also becomes in this sequence a journey across the American continent: the effort to become integrated, to be part of a wider whole, is reflected in the pilgrimage across the different North American states found in the sequence. The six long poems that are part of it hold both a physical journey and a journey towards the depths of the self. The crossing in the psychical plane of rivers flowing across some states is a symbol for the passage of the self and the return to the past through memory so as to build a new order. River Tittebewassee, which flows across Roethke's birth city, Saginaw, becomes a flow through memory, towards childhood memories, and moves from being a thread of water, "the first trembling of a Michigan brook in April" (Roethke 1975: 185) to becoming a torrent of energy when "the whole river begins to move forward, its bridges shaking" (1975: 185) sweeping away whatever it finds. The identification of this brook in a first moment with the weak ontological security of the poet, which becomes stronger until its culmination in a unstoppable flood gushing forth is more than obvious: likewise, all the places and regions named in this sequence, while retaining its physical existence, become significant milestones in a simultaneous spiritual journey, as regions of the self that the poet dispels in his poetry.

The *North American Sequence* is, in this respect, an epitome of the reconciliation of Roethke with himself, with his fractured self, through the organizing power of memory, past and desire: the creation of a new order, after the false self, the palimpsest identity, has been destroyed; in sum, the search of a satisfactory order through poetry.

NOTES

(1) The relation between bi-polar syndrome (also known as manic-depressive syndrome) and schizophrenia is so deep, and their symptoms so similar and often overlapping, that for a long time both were considered to be a single illness (see Jamison 1994, 59-60).

(2) The common sign of identity for these poets, according to Mills is their desire to "cultivate their own inwardness as material for poetry or to look to the immediacies of their own situation for valid experience (1969: 6).

(3) Thus, Plath suffered a series of 'breakdowns' since she was 21, followed by several suicide attempts documented in *The Bell Jar*, and ended committing suicide at 31, in 1965. Lowell suffered several periods of commitment from 1949 to his death, and Sexton's exploration of social taboos such as addictions and drugs resulted in her suicide at 46. Berryman also had to face several commitments due to nervous illnesses and alcoholism.

(4) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder associated with serious traumatic events and characterized by such symptoms as survivor guilt, reliving the trauma in dreams, numbness and lack of involvement with reality, or recurrent thoughts and images. It can be caused by exposure to traumatic events such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or violent personal assaults such as rape. Symptoms also include recurring intrusive memories of the traumatic experience; a feelings of detachment and estrangement, or "psychological numbing"; and a heightened sense of anxiety or a lowering of the "fear threshold."

(5) What Frost calls a "momentary stay against confusion" (1964: vi)

(6) The image of the greenhouse is central in Roethke's poetic though, and it acquires different meanings along his work. His father, Otto, owned of the biggest covered plantations in the United States, and the growth and development of the poet in these surroundings is reflected in the symbolic recurrence of images of vegetation and greenhouses.

(7) Taking into account the influence by T. S. Eliot on Roethke, it is pertinent to consider the *North American Sequence* as a poetic answer to the poetic explorations that Eliot attempts in *Four Quartets*. Roethke's journey, from his origins in the Middle West to the Northeast, is parallel to the journey from the Middle West to the East (Europe) where young Tom Eliot, born and educated in Saint Louis, Virginia, found his 'real' self.

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